

John Wesley and the Commitments of the Gospel

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John Wesley (1703-1791) was an English clergyman and theologian who became the founder of a movement called Methodism, which began as a revival in the Church of England. Wesley's revival focussed on inner transformation and a personal response to the work of God's holy Spirit within the individual. As Wesley's revival movement took hold, he was denounced by other clergy in the Church of England for being a fanatic and a heretic.

Recently, a meme has been circulating on social media called "Wesley's Manifesto." In fact, Wesley never produced a written-down list of principles such as this manifesto. It was compiled in 2017 by Gary Best, who is an historical consultant at the "New Room" in Bristol, England, a church built by Wesley himself in 1739. The words, however, do come from various writings of John Wesley which are posted on the website of the New Room.

These principles, taken from various writings of Wesley, have withstood the test of time. They sound remarkably contemporaneous in this 21st century. The list consists of these twelve principles (in language which has been updated for contemporary use):

1. Reduce the gap between rich people and poor people.
2. Help everyone to have a job.
3. Help the poorest, including introducing a living wage.
4. Offer the best possible education.
5. Help everyone to feel they can make a difference.
6. Promote tolerance.
7. Promote equal treatment for women.
8. Create a society based on values, not profits and consumerism.
9. End all forms of slavery.
10. Avoid getting into wars.
11. Share the love of God with everyone.
12. Care for the environment.

I bring this "Manifesto" up in response to a comment I received a week ago. I wrote two columns about the Ten Commitments produced by the American Humanist Association, and a good friend wrote to thank me for those two columns. He continued, "It's too bad Christianity doesn't have this kind of ethical dimension."

I told him he was wrong, and we had quite a wonderful conversation. At its very best, Christian faith exhibits a level of concern and compassion for making life whole for all people and for all creatures. Indeed, John Wesley was well ahead of his time in challenging the status quo.

Wesley had a strong concern for the poorest and most vulnerable among us, children and women.

He advocated that children should receive an education. In his own words, "The end of education ... [is to] help us discover every false judgement of our minds, and to subdue every wrong passion in our hearts ... [and] to understand as much as we are able." Without an education, we will not be able to distinguish between the multitude of choices which face us.

This has become even more true with the innumerable opinions and prejudices we see on social media. Only by critical thinking can we discern a helpful way through all the nonsense.

Wesley also strongly promoted equality between men and women. In a time when women were largely discounted, he wrote, “May not women as well as men bear an honourable part? You, as well as men, are rational creatures. You, like men, were made in the image of God.” It was a radical opinion in Wesley’s time, and one which the church of that day labelled as a foolish and unfaithful approach.

Wesley was also well ahead of his time in advocating for an end to slavery. The British Parliament didn’t abolish the slave trade until 1807; slaves in the colonies were only freed some 30 years later. In the USA, the 13th amendment abolishing slavery wasn’t passed until 1865. Wesley strongly opposed slavery. “Away with all whips, all chains, all compulsion! Do with everyone else as you would he should do to you.” He quoted the Golden Rule as the basis for his assertion that we treat every other human being with justice and dignity.

He recognized the poverty of a society based on consumerism and acquisitiveness. “In seeking happiness from riches, you are only striving to drink out of empty cups. And let them be painted and gilded ever so finely, they are empty still.”

He used some of his strongest language to advocate against war. “War: What farther proof of do we need of the utter degeneracy of all nations from the plainest principles of reason and virtue? Of the absolute want, both of common sense and common humanity, which runs through the whole race of mankind?”

Finally, his concern for the environment was centuries ahead of the rest of the world. “Lead us beyond an exclusive concern for the well-being of other human beings to the broader concern for the well-being of the birds in our backyards, the fish in our rivers, and every living creature on the face of the earth.”

In that wonderful conversation with my friend, I agreed that the church has indeed failed the world and the gospel in many ways. I suggested to him that there are humanists who have failed to live up to the Ten Commitments of the American Humanist Association. It is an aspirational document, a set of commitments which are necessary if the world and our communities are to thrive. It’s purpose is to spur us all to be more committed to behaviour which strengthens the collective welfare of humanity and this fragile planet which we call home.

In the same way, the church has failed to live up to the aspirational heart of the gospel. Nevertheless, the gospel intends to point us to live in ways which are loving to all our neighbours, human and non-human alike. The gospel promotes a life of compassion and grace.

Both the Ten Commitments and the Gospel have inspired people to shine with the light of hope in the midst of the bleakness in our world throughout history.